

Army faces queries on 'spiritual fitness' test

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [February 8, 2011](#) issue

The army is facing questions over a "spiritual fitness" portion of a mandatory questionnaire, with some atheists calling it "invidious and not inclusive" of soldiers who are nonbelievers.

The Wisconsin-based Freedom From Religion Foundation learned in December that soldiers were being asked to respond to statements such as "I am a spiritual person" and "I believe there is a purpose for my life."

If soldiers received a low score on their spiritual fitness questions, they received an assessment that said "spiritual fitness is an area of possible difficulty for you. . . . Improving your spiritual fitness should be an important goal."

In a December 29 letter to Secretary of the Army John McHugh, the atheist foundation asked for an immediate end to the spiritual evaluation components of the Global Assessment Tool and related programs.

"It is ironic that while nonbelievers are fighting to protect the freedoms for all Americans, their freedoms are being trampled upon by this army practice," wrote Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor.

A lawyer for the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, which has combated aggressive proselytizing at the U.S. Air Force Academy, also demanded that McHugh end the spiritual assessment, which the group called unconstitutional.

Lt. Col. David Patterson, a spokesman for the army, said officials respect soldiers' individual choices about religion. "Although spiritual fitness is offered to all soldiers, it is not meant by any means to influence, dissuade nor entice soldiers to believe in a deity, endorse religion, or in any way state that a soldier is unfit to serve if they lack spiritual fitness," he said.

The Global Assessment Tool has been mandatory since October 2009 for soldiers in basic training and is taken annually by those who are not deployed to a combat zone. Soldiers' scores are confidential and cannot be used in determining promotions, Patterson said.

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Paul Lester, a research psychologist with the army's Comprehensive Soldier Fitness program, said the follow-up "spiritual fitness modules" that are meant to help a soldier improve his or her spirituality are voluntary. "If you score low, you are not required to take the modules," he said. "You take it at your own volition."

He emphasized that despite the scoring of the questionnaire, no one is considered to have failed it. "It is not a test," he said. "You don't pass or fail. You take the questionnaire and we provide tailored feedback to how you do overall."

Lester said scientific research links spirituality with positive coping skills and decreased odds of attempting suicide. "That's what the peer-reviewed research shows," he said.

But Gaylor of the Freedom From Religion Foundation said a low score on a spiritual-fitness questionnaire—and what she called its accompanying "arrogant and condescending" response—could be detrimental. "It's the kind of thing that might make someone go out and commit suicide," she said.

Lester said there is ongoing analysis to determine if the assessment tool is making a positive difference in the army. "It is too

soon to say publicly," he said. —RNS